

One of a Kind Uhl Insulator

By Cole King

One-Of-A-Kind Uhl Insulator

Many of you may be familiar with Uhl Pottery, or at least the distinctive logo used on their “Acorn Ware” line of products. The wide array of items made by the firm are quite popular with collectors, and their pieces often turn up in antique malls, auctions, and flea markets. The company was founded in 1849 by German immigrants August and Louis Uhl in Evansville, Indiana. Soon after, they found better quality clay in Dubois County, and had their raw material shipped to Evansville from Huntingburg. In 1879, the name was changed to Uhl Pottery Company, and ultimately moved all operations to Huntingburg in late 1908.

Up until his passing last June, my grandfather Ralph King was a casual crock collector, picking them up for cheap here and there. Seeing his display in my grandparents’ sun room is how I first became familiar with the Uhl brand. However, Uhl, or even pottery in general, was never on my collecting radar. I’ve settled into my role of an insulator collector fairly comfortably, and I had no intention of change.



3-Gallon Uhl crock
with early
Evansville logo.
Collection of Ralph
and Suzy King



On December 8, 2024, my family and I stopped at an antique store in Ferdinand, Indiana, and had a look around. Ferdinand is south east of Huntingburg by just a few miles, and this store was bursting at the seams with local Uhl pottery items. The very first room of the store was lined with glass cases, each displaying a wide array of trinkets and do-dads. My eye was drawn to the corner case, which housed a shelf of miniature Uhl items, unlike their utilitarian pottery I was familiar with. On the very back of the shelf, I was surprised to see what appeared to be a small strain

insulator. A number of factors drew my attention; First of all, it was remarkably crude. You just couldn’t ignore that it was obviously hand-made. Secondly, the glaze was a vibrant blue color. Not typical of most strain insulators. It stood out, even to someone such as myself, who normally doesn’t pay much attention to porcelain strains. Lastly, it was very out of place. How did this insulator find itself mixed in with these keepsakes from the Uhl factory?

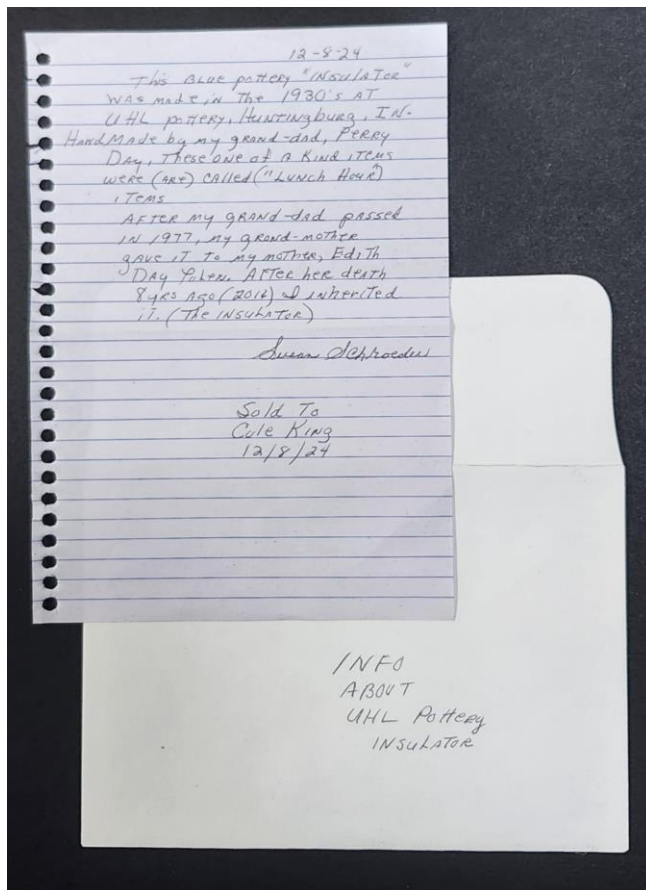
I asked an employee to open the case, so I could take another look.

The first thing I noticed was the price. For this little insulator, no larger than a chicken egg, the price tag read a staggering \$148. As if she read my mind, the shopkeeper explained that their store is frequented by Uhl collectors, and that this kind of price tag was not uncommon among oddities such as this.

I replied that, should this be an authentic Uhl insulator, I would certainly be interested in purchasing it. However, for that kind of price, I would need more information on its origin.



The store owner graciously called the seller, and in just a few minutes, I was on the phone with her. This insulator was apart of a collection of what the seller called "Uhl Lunch Hour Pieces." I was intrigued, as I find glass items of a similar nature to be interesting. (Think of the Hemingray after-hours frogs, or glass 'whimsy turtles'.) However, it was the provenance of the piece that really took me by surprise. The seller, Ms. Susan Schroeder, explained that her grandfather, who she claimed to be the head mold maker at Uhl in the 1930's, made this insulator by hand, and gave it to her grandmother. I told Ms. Schroeder that should she be willing to write down this story to the best of her recollection, I would pay her asking price. Less than half an our later, I found myself in her kitchen.



Her hand-written letter of authenticity reads as such:

"Info About Uhl Pottery Insulator:

This blue pottery 'insulator' was made in the 1930's at Uhl Pottery, Huntingburg, IN. Handmade by my grand-dad, Perry Day. These one of a kind items were (are) called ('lunch hour') items. After my grand-dad passed in 1977, my grand-mother gave it to my mother, Edith Day Polen. After her death 8 years ago (2016) I inherited it. (The insulator.)

Susan Schroeder

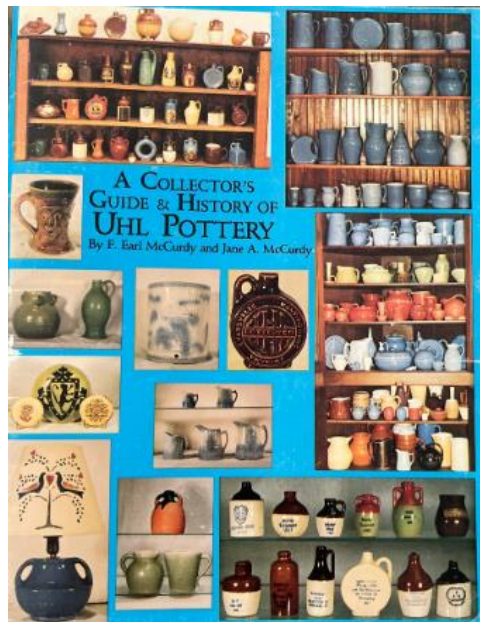
Sold to Cole King 12/8/24"

In addition to this letter, I was delighted to learn that not only was Perry Day an employee of Uhl, he was quite prominent in the Ohio Valley Pottery industry.

After 17 years of employment at Uhl in his native town of Huntingburg, Perry was hired by Louisville Pottery as their superintendent. Once

at Louisville Pottery, he met Mary Alice Hadley, and helped her found the Hadley Pottery Company in Louisville in the early 1940's. To further back up this information, Susan allowed me to see the Uhl pieces displayed atop her kitchen cabinets, as well as a remarkable display of hand-painted Hadley pottery. One such piece was of early production, glazed in black with white artwork, (contrary to the common white glaze with blue paint) and hand etched on the back by M.A. Hadley herself.





Despite all of this information, the story still seemed too good to be true. If Perry Day were making keepsakes for his wife, why choose something which was (at the time) considered utilitarian, and even ugly?

That night, I took to Facebook to find an Uhl expert to further verify the insulator's origin. By morning, I was contacted by Mr. Earl McCurdy, author of the 1988 book, "A Collector's Guide & History of Uhl Pottery." Earl quickly noted the blue glaze matched "perfectly" to the distinct blue glaze color found on many Uhl pieces of this time period.

I quickly realized that Mr. McCurdy must have been top of his class at Uhl University. Monday morning, I spoke with Earl on the phone, and learned he is undeniably the expert in his field. He effortlessly quoted Uhl catalogs. Information on the company history flowed from him like a natural spring.

When I asked if he had by chance heard of a fellow named Perry Day, he nonchalantly replied, "Oh, sure!"

Come to find out, Earl was lucky enough to interview members of the Uhl family when he was authoring his book in the late 1980's. In these discussions, he said, Perry's name came up often. He was not aware what Day's specific job duties were, but confidently stated that, "Perry Day was a man whom the Uhl family thought very highly of." He is even credited with the invention of one of Uhl's most popular glaze colors. McCurdy's book reads, "An interesting glaze that was developed by Perry Day was called 'brindle.' Uhl Pottery had earlier tried to use Patoka River clay for their wares, but found the clay to have a low melting point. This made the clay impossible to be formed and fired. However, by accident, Patoka River clay was mixed with glaze, and brindle glaze was discovered. Brindle glaze was used on many barrel mugs and pitchers. The color is tan with dark brown specks throughout the glaze."



This pitcher, whose pattern is referred to by collectors as the "grape and trellis," was produced by Uhl until their closing in 1943. Louisville pottery claimed the molds after their purchase of the factory, and continued to manufacture the same pitcher, even using the same Uhl part numbers in their catalogues.

(Pitcher in the collection of R&S King, 1949 Louisville Pottery catalogue photo courtesy of Earl McCurdy.)



Uhl Pottery Company closed in 1943, and was subsequently sold to its rival, Louisville Pottery. McCurdy published in his 1988 book:

“In July of 1950, it was announced that on October 15, 1950, Louisville Pottery would abandon the Uhl Pottery Plant in Huntingburg. Louis Uhl wrote to Perry Day, his ex-plant superintendent, who was working for Hadley Pottery in Louisville, Kentucky, in hopes of having them lease the Uhl Pottery plant and use Uhl’s moulds as an extension of their line of pottery goods. Hadley Pottery turned down the offer.”



(Photo 1) Uhl insulator with Uhl Acorn Wares jug. (Photo 2) Insulator displayed with other Uhl items to compare glaze color. (Photo 3) Uhl made a wide array of products, including this 5 gallon jug. Insulator guy for scale.

To learn more about Perry Day, I reached out to Hadley Pottery. To my surprise, I found this on their website:



M.A. Hadley mug with hand-pulled handle attached by Perry Day.

“In 2018, the Hadley Pottery was purchased by the Day family, who have been involved with Hadley since its inception. When Mr. and Mrs. Hadley decided to open Hadley Pottery their first hire was Perry Day, who had been in charge of production at Louisville Pottery. Perry Day and his son, Tom Day, ran the manufacturing side of the business while Mrs. Hadley did artwork and designs.

Mary Alice Hadley died in 1965, at which time Perry Day retired and Tom Day took his place at the company. Tom's son, Jerry Day, joined Hadley Pottery in 1974 to assist his father and Jerry Day was joined in 1998 by his son, Josh Day. Josh is the fourth generation of the family to be associated with the company. Jerry's sister, Judy, and her husband, Mark Snyder, are also longtime employees of Hadley Pottery. Josh Day even has a daughter named Hadley Day. Jerry and Josh Day continue to be integral to the running of Hadley. Both believe that it would please their fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfather to know that the durable quality and colorful designs of Hadley ware will continue unchanged.”

Hadley Pottery was sold in 2022, but the company’s curator was kind enough to pass my contact information to Perry’s grandson, Jerry Day.

I spoke with Jerry on the phone on January 17, 2025. He informed me that unfortunately, the Day family is no longer officially affiliated with the Hadley company. Jerry started with Hadley Pottery in 1974, and retired after 50 years in 2024. His grandfather was with Hadley for 25 years, retiring the very same day Mary Alice Hadley died. The two had met at Louisville Pottery, but under different circumstances than I had first believed. Mary Alice did not work at Louisville Pottery, she was simply allowed to fire her painted dinnerware in their kilns. When John B. Taylor purchased the factory in 1938, Mary Alice was no



A cast-handled mug (left) compared to a "hand-pulled" handle (right), attached personally by Perry Day.
Photo courtesy Jerry Day.

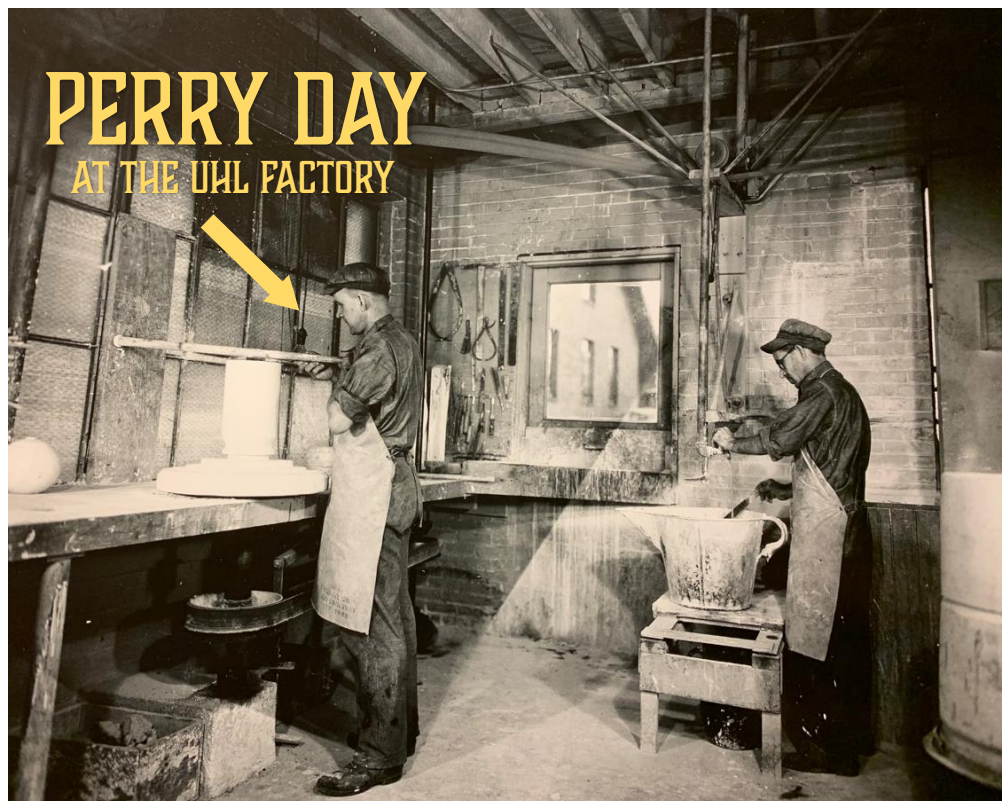
longer permitted to utilize the Louisville (now J. B. Taylor) facilities. Perry Day went with her when she left, serving as her Head of Manufacturing until his retirement. Jerry explained to me that his grandfather was the only person to ever attach the "hand-pulled" handles to Hadley's mugs. Perry had made molds for the mugs to be cast with a handle, but stated clearly that "you won't do that as long as I'm here!" The reason for his retirement after the death of Mary Alice was that he, "worked for M.A. Hadley the woman, not M.A. Hadley the company."

Perry was well remembered by his employees, some of whom later became his grandson Jerry's co-workers. He was firm, and very down to business. However, he always wanted what was best for his loyal employees. As Perry

was so integral to the founding of Hadley Pottery, it was agreed that he would receive an annual profit-sharing check. Each year, however, he returned the money to the company, and insisted that the money be divided amongst the workers as a Christmas bonus. After his retirement, the bonuses stopped.

Sadly, most photos of Perry Day were lost in a fire some years ago. Luckily, this photo was immortalized in McCurdy's book.

He is buried with his wife Susa in his hometown of Huntingburg, Indiana.



The question persists, however, why did Perry make this insulator in the first place?

Chris Hedges (National Insulator Association Central Region Vice President) said that to answer this question, you have to consider the day-to-day living conditions of the average American at the time this strain was made.

“Short wave radio was a popular source of information,” said Chris. “World War 2 was just around the corner, and people were aware of the political tension in Europe and across the world. They wanted to hear the latest information from sources like the BBC, so many households wanted a radio in their home to stay up-to-date on global news. America was in the grasp of the Great Depression,” Chris added, “so if he needed a new insulator for his home radio, why pay 5 cents for one at the hardware store, when he can make one for free at work?”

I find this to be a great theory, because the insulator does show some grime where a wire would have rubbed the glaze during repeated use.



Another theory came from Uhl researcher and author Earl McCurdy, who said that, while a long shot, perhaps Perry Day created the insulator to show to the Uhl family, in order to have it added to their product line-up. Again quoting the economic troubles the United States was facing at the time, McCurdy stated that Uhl was struggling to stay afloat. Sales were declining, and management was desperate to find new ways to bolster their business. Perry Day, after all, was of some importance at the Uhl factory. It is possible that he had enough influence amongst senior management to suggest to them a new product. I replied to Earl however, that considering how crude the insulator is, it would be unlikely this would pass as a suitable prototype. His response was, “Well, you have to start somewhere.” I suppose he’s right about that.



In conclusion, we may never know exactly why this insulator was made. But thankfully, this one-of-a-kind piece is now apart of the insulator hobby, where it will find a good home for many years to come.

As for me, I fear I have come down with a new affliction. This author can report that as of January 2025, he is member #2471 of the UHL Collector’s Society.

“Brindle” glazed mug.
This color glaze was
developed by Perry Day.